

# MOTORCYCLES



Motorcyclists cruise through Arches National Park in Utah.

# ***ON THE MOVE***

by Phyllis McIntosh



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Ask motorcyclists why they love to ride two-wheelers, and they often wax poetic. One 63-year-old rhapsodized after a first ride: “It was a life-altering experience. For the first time in my life, I felt connected to the Universe, the wind, the trees, the mountains, even the rocks. ... I felt consumed with and happily lost in this place of wild, wild winds and peace, and I will do anything to get there again.”

When you ride a motorcycle, notes a Motorcycle Industry Council booklet, “suddenly, even the long way home isn’t long enough.”

But there is also a practical side to these vehicles. Versatile and highly maneuverable, motorcycles have been reliable workhorses for police departments and the military, and they continue to provide an inexpensive alternative to cars. Still, for many of the owners of the eight million motorcycles in the United States, two-wheelers represent recreation and a way of life rather than basic transportation. There is a motorcycle to suit any rider’s interest, whether it be racing, exploring off-road terrain, or simply cruising on back roads.

**(right)** This 1915 Indian motorcycle came from the Indian Motorcycle Company, which at that time was the largest motorcycle manufacturer in the world.

**(below)** Two women participate in the Oyster Run in Anacortes, Washington. In the United States one in ten motorcycle owners and about one-quarter of motorcycle riders are women.



Through hundreds of clubs and organizations, motorcycles bring together riders of like-minded interests, professions, religions, and ethnicities. Many ride not just for fun, but also to support charities that benefit groups ranging from autistic children to wounded veterans.

## History of Motorcycles

As the 19th century drew to a close, numerous inventors were trying to design new gasoline-powered vehicles, both four-wheeled and two-wheeled. One of the most successful was Charles Metz, who founded a company in Waltham, Massachusetts, to manufacture racing bicycles. According to some accounts, Metz attached an internal combustion engine to a bicycle to create a pace bike with which to train his racing team. His innovation led to the first mass-production motorcycle, known as the Orient-Aster. Metz introduced the motorbike in Boston in 1900 at the first recorded motorcycle race in the United States. The Orient completed a five-mile course in only seven minutes.

The next few years saw the establishment of two brands that would dominate the U.S. motorcycle market for half a century. The Indian Motorcycle Company, created in 1901, was for several decades the largest motorcycle manufacturer in the world. Although the original company went out of business in 1953, other companies are still attempting to resurrect the Indian brand. Indian's rival, Harley-Davidson, founded in 1903, has experienced far greater success and now ranks as the iconic name in American-made motorcycles. (See page 44.)

It didn't take long for the versatile vehicles to catch the attention of the military and law enforcement. During World War I, before the era of radio communications, couriers delivered vital messages by motorcycle. In both world wars, the vehicles' speed and maneuverability made them naturals for scouting and reconnaissance missions. And on the home front, police departments began to rely on motorcycles to navigate city traffic.

## Evolution of Motorcycling

Despite their popularity with the military and police, motorcycles have traditionally had a "bad boy" image. After World War II, restless young men, including some veterans seeking the camaraderie they had known in the military, took to the road with fellow motorcyclists who liked to ride and party hard. With scary insignias and names such as Pagans, Outlaws, and Warlocks, they cultivated a rebellious image. Some gangs, such as the notorious Hell's Angels, had highly publicized run-ins with the law. A 1953 movie, *The Wild One*, starring Marlon Brando and based on an actual biker street party and riot in California, did much to fuel the outlaw stereotype.

During the 1960s, a much more wholesome image of motorcyclists emerged, thanks to one of the most successful advertising campaigns of all time. In 1962, Japanese manufacturer Honda launched an ad with the slogan "You meet the nicest people on a Honda" that featured scenes of housewives, young couples, and a parent and child riding Honda motorcycles. The ad, which ran in various versions for ten years, made motorcycles a

respectable means of around-town transportation and boosted Honda's sales in the United States by a whopping 500 percent.

At the same time, once-rebellious motorcyclists were settling down to marriages, families, and careers. However, many never lost their love of motorcycles. Now middle-aged or older, in some cases retired, they have the time and money to pursue their hobby again. In fact, the average age of Harley-Davidson owners is approaching 50. According to the Motorcycle Industry Council, the percentage of owners aged 50 and older tripled between 1985 and 2002. (Since then, there also has been a surge in younger riders, many being attracted by the sportier models of bikes.)

The demographics have changed in other ways as well. Bikers today are just as likely to be well-established doctors, lawyers, and bankers as they are to be blue-collar workers. Within the motorcycling community, this new breed of riders is known as RUBs (Rich Urban Bikers), or Rubbies. Women, including grandmas and great-grandmas, also are getting in on the fun. According to the Motorcycle Industry Council, almost a quarter of all riders are women, as are one in ten of all motorcycle owners.

## A Bike for Every Taste

Motorcycles today come in a variety of styles to suit the wide range of riders. The main types include:

- **Cruisers.** These big, heavy machines harken back to the classic styles of the mid-20th century.

With their low seat, high handlebars, and feet-forward riding position, they have a "cool," laid-back look. Offering a comfortable ride, cruisers account for about 60 percent of the U.S. market.



© JEFF BANKE / SHUTTERSTOCK.COM  
This touring bike is built to protect the rider from wind and rain and has a large gas tank and luggage space.

- **Touring bikes.** Designed for long-distance travel, these bikes offer a smooth ride and comfortable seating for the driver and a passenger. Other features include a large windshield and fairing (a rigid plastic structure on the front of the bike to deflect wind



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Motocross bikes like this one are used in closed-course racing.



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This motorcycle helmet has an attached face shield.

and rain), large-capacity fuel tanks, cruise control, and generous luggage space.

- **Sport.** With high-tech engines and lightweight frames, sport bikes are designed for optimal acceleration, speed, braking, and cornering, often at the expense of rider comfort, fuel economy, and sometimes safety.
- **Traditional, or standard.** Versatile, moderately powered, and relatively inexpensive, these straightforward machines are ideal for novice riders and for everyday use in both town and country.
- **Dual-purpose.** These street-legal bikes come equipped with big knobby tires, a strong suspension system, and a high center of gravity for navigating rough off-road terrain.
- **Off-road.** These come in two types: motocross bikes, built for closed-course racing only, and dirt bikes, or trail bikes, which can handle a variety of terrains. Since they are not equipped with headlights and turn signals, neither type is allowed on public streets.

Regardless of the kind of bike, a rider's attire is much the same. While style is important, motorcycle gear is designed first and foremost for protection. Most crucial is a helmet, which, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, reduces the risk of death by 37 percent and risk of head injury by 69 percent.

Other essential gear includes a face shield or goggles to protect the eyes, over-the-ankle leather boots with non-slip soles, leather or synthetic gloves to help grip the handlebars, and rugged jacket and pants made of leather or sturdy synthetic such as Kevlar or nylon. While some riders, especially Harley-Davidson owners, still opt for the traditional all-black leather attire, motorcycle clothing and helmets come in a variety of bright colors that have the advantage of improving visibility on the road.

## Modern Motorcycling

Just as there are motorcycles to suit every rider, there are groups, activities, and equipment to accommodate every motorcycle need or interest. These include:

- **Special interest motorcycle clubs.** Bikers today can find clubs organized by gender, age, religion, profession, and ethnic origin. Women motorcyclists can choose among 25 national organizations, such as Women on Wheels or Chrome Divas, as well as some 75 regional groups.

Clubs for African American and Latino riders date back decades and are growing in number. The list of black motorcycle clubs across the country now tops 285. The worldwide Latin American Motorcycle Association, with several dozen chapters in the United States, joins with Latino Harley-Davidson owners, known as Harlistas, for rallies and other activities.

Motorcyclists over 40 might join the Older Bikers Riding Club or the Retreads Motorcycle Club, which boasts more than 5,000 members worldwide. For bikers who prefer to ride with members of their own religion, there are such groups as the Christian Motorcyclists Association and the Jewish Hillel's Angels.



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Main Street in Sturgis, South Dakota, is crowded with motorcycles during its motorcycle rally, which has been held every August for more than 70 years.

Profession-oriented clubs include the Motorcycling Doctors Association, the Blue Knights International Law Enforcement Motorcycle Club, and the Amicus Curiae Motorcycle Club for riders in the legal profession.

Hobbyists, too, are represented, as in the Motorcycling Amateur Radio Club, which provides reliable two-way radio communications during charity events. And social network clubs “meet” online to discuss motorcycling.



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Bikers venturing out from the Sturgis Motorcycle Rally head down the road toward Mount Rushmore National Memorial.

- **Rallies.** For decades, motorcyclists have enjoyed getting together in one location for fun-filled days of races, hill climbs, concerts, street festivals, and charity rides. Such events are mushrooming as more towns seek to boost their economy by attracting the new breed of Rich Urban Bikers and baby boomer riders to motorcycle rallies. In 2011, 54 major rallies occurred throughout the country.

The largest and most famous of all is the Sturgis Motorcycle Rally, held for more than 70 years in the small community of Sturgis in the Black Hills of South Dakota. Every August half a million motorcycling enthusiasts and hundreds of vendors descend on Sturgis for a week of races, stunts, bike demos, concerts, and parades. Many individual riders and groups enjoy day trips through the Black Hills to nearby sites, such as Mount Rushmore National Memorial.

Sturgis also is home to a Motorcycle Museum and Hall of Fame, which showcases nearly 100 motorcycles dating back to 1905 and honors motorcycle legends, celebrities, and others who have had an impact on motorcycling.

- **Riding for a cause.** Philanthropy is a major focus of the motorcycling community. Motorcycle clubs regularly sponsor rides and events to support hospitals, food banks, the Red Cross, and a host of charities that benefit veterans, sick and needy children, and victims of diseases such as AIDS, cancer, and diabetes.

- **Gadgets.** Innumerable gadgets are available to improve a motorcyclist's safety, comfort, and convenience. Headlight and brake light modulators that flicker four times a second can aid visibility of commuters who frequently dodge in and out of traffic. Because road sensors that turn a traffic light to green are not sensitive enough to detect motorcycles, a rider tired of being stuck at red lights may want a Green Light Trigger, a magnet that attaches to the undercarriage of the bike and is powerful enough to trip the sensor.

New high-tech audio and video gadgets include a helmet cam to record and download favorite road trips, a helmet intercom that enables a rider to communicate with a friend up to five miles away, and a handlebar-mounted CB radio, audio, and intercom system. With a device called Mix-It, a biker can plug in

multiple audio sources, such as satellite radio, an iPod, cell phone, even a GPS and a radar detector that will automatically override any music being played.

- **Environmentally friendly motorcycles.** Motorcycle manufacturers have joined automobile companies in the quest for less polluting, more energy-efficient engines. Several electric- and hydrogen-powered models already are on the market, though it's not clear how readily bikers will accept them. They don't look "cool," some complain, and they're disturbingly quiet. After all, what is motorcycling without that distinctive roar of the engine?

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However they are powered, whether they are basic or fancy, motorcycles will no doubt remain an integral part of American culture and continue to hold a fascination for millions of riders. As one anonymous author wrote: "Four wheels move the body. Two wheels move the soul."

## Websites of Interest

### American Motorcyclist Association

[www.americanmotorcyclist.com](http://www.americanmotorcyclist.com)

The American Motorcyclist Association, which claims to be the world's largest motorcycling organization, advocates for bikers' rights, sanctions competitions and recreational events, and preserves the history of the sport through a Motorcycle Hall of Fame Museum. This official website features news about racing, touring, and upcoming events, motorcycle clubs, and laws and issues affecting bikers.

### Harley-Davidson

[www.harley-davidson.com](http://www.harley-davidson.com)

In addition to providing information about motorcycling events, learning to ride, and customizing a bike, this website of the leading American motorcycle manufacturer offers a guide to the Harley-Davidson Museum in Milwaukee and highlights the growing diversity among its dealers, bike owners, and riders.

### Motorcycle Safety Foundation

<http://msf-usa.org>

Safety is the key word here. This site promotes the Foundation's safe rider courses and offers safety tips for motorcyclists. Several booklets and documents are downloadable.

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PHYLLIS McINTOSH is a freelance writer whose work has appeared in many national magazines.

## Motorcycle Jargon

**ape hangers** – motorcycle handlebars that are very high and often raise the rider's hands above the shoulders

**cage** – a car, truck, or other vehicle that confines the inhabitants within an enclosed space (unlike a motorcycle)

**chopper** – a motorcycle that has been customized by "chopping off" nonessential parts to make it go faster

**farkles** – a combination of "function" and "sparkle" that refers to motorcycle accessories, such as radar detectors, GPS receivers, heated handlebar grips, and satellite radios

**knobbies** – tires used by off-road motorcycle racers; knobbies have large square knobs of rubber tread arranged in various ways to best grab the dirt

**motocross** – off-road motorcycle racing held on enclosed, rough circuits; the name is a combination of *motorcycle* and *cross-country*

**sidecar** – a one-wheeled carriage for a single passenger attached to the side of a motorcycle

**squid** – a younger motorcycle rider who does not respect laws, follow safety rules, or wear proper gear

**tricked out** – adorned with many customizations

**uncork** – open up the throttle to obtain top speed



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Chopper



Harley-Davidson vendors attract attention at Bike Week in Daytona Beach, Florida.

## The World of Harley-Davidson

Within the motorcycling community, no symbol is as universally recognized as the bar and shield of the Harley-Davidson company, the iconic American motorcycle manufacturer.

Founded in 1903 in a small shed in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, by William Harley and Arthur and Walter Davidson, the company grew rapidly and by 1920 was the largest motorcycle manufacturer in the world. During the two world wars, Harley was the chief supplier of motorcycles to the military—20,000 in World War I and 88,000 in World War II. According to the company history, the first American soldier to enter Germany after the end of World War I was riding a Harley.

Harley-Davidson delivered its first police motorcycle to the Detroit, Michigan, Police

Department in 1908 and controlled the law enforcement market for more than 60 years thereafter. Officers in more than 3,400 U.S. police departments, as well as those in 45 other countries, still use Harleys as their official mode of transport.

In unofficial travel, the company is most famous for its large, heavy cruisers, fondly known as hogs. HOG also happens to be the acronym for the Harley Owners Group, which boasts nearly a million members. Today, the company proudly showcases various segments of the Harley community, including women and military and veteran riders, the Latino Harlistas, and the Iron Elite, which honors African American bikers.

# Rolling Thunder

The largest motorcycle rally for a cause is Rolling Thunder. Hundreds of thousands of bikers converge on Washington, D.C., every Memorial Day weekend as a tribute to America's war heroes.

The event began in 1988, when 2,500 motorcyclists from across the country rode to the U.S. Capitol to demand that the government account for all prisoners of war and missing in action from the Vietnam War. While planning that first event, one of the organizers had envisioned the crowd of motorcycles crossing Memorial Bridge and said, "It will be like the sound of rolling thunder coming across the bridge."

Every year since 1988, the group has sponsored a Memorial Day "Ride for Freedom" to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall on the National Mall in Washington. This year Rolling Thunder celebrated its 25th anniversary.

In 2007, Rolling Thunder was incorporated as a non-profit organization. With more than 7,500 members in the United States as well as other countries, it promotes legislation to benefit veterans and to resolve prisoner-of-war and missing-in-action issues from all wars. Each year the organization also provides hundreds of thousands of dollars in financial aid and other essentials to veterans and their families and to women's crisis centers.



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A kid slaps hands with one of the riders in the Rolling Thunder motorcycle rally in Washington, D.C. The rally has been an annual event since 1988.